

Museum Meanings

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The museum has been constructed as a symbol in Western society since the Renaissance. This symbol is both complex and multi-layered, acting as a sign for domination and liberation, learning and leisure. As sites for exposition, through their collections, displays and buildings, museums mediate many of society's basic values. But these mediations are subject to contestation, and the museum can also be seen as a site for cultural politics. In post-colonial societies, museums have changed radically, reinventing themselves under pressure from many forces, which include new roles and functions for museums, economic rationalism and moves towards greater democratic access.

Museum Meanings analyses and explores the relationships between museums and their publics. 'Museums' are understood very broadly, to include art galleries, historic sites and historic houses. 'Relationships with publics' is also understood very broadly, including interactions with artefacts, exhibitions and architecture, which may be analysed from a range of theoretical perspectives. These include material culture studies, mass communication and media studies, and learning theories and cultural studies. The analysis of the relationship of the museum to its publics shifts the emphasis from the museum as text, to studies grounded in the relationships of bodies and sites, identities and communities.

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A museum manager discusses museum communication

Stephen Locke

This chapter is concerned with the issues of managing two types of communication: the communication of the museum's purpose to its public and communication between museum colleagues. If the former is to be achieved, the latter is crucial. I describe the experience of Hampshire County Council Museums Service in the hope that, suitably considered and interpreted, it will be relevant to others.

Setting the scene: introduction to Hampshire County Council Museums Service

The public face of Hampshire County Council Museums Service is a network of thirteen museums, eight of which are local museums based on a particular model. The other museums differ in various respects, chiefly being more specialized or site-specific. The Service as a whole is supported by a headquarters and collection management centre. This account is concerned with the eight local museums which have been deliberately planned and developed to communicate a particular role.

The fundamental basis for our communication is our Statement of Purpose: 'We aim to inspire and satisfy a deeper level of interest, enjoyment and understanding of Hampshire's heritage and environment, by developing the full potential of the museum collections in our care, and assisting other organizations with similar aims.'

This Statement is clearly founded on communication of the attributes of museum collections; the provision of assistance to other organizations, although a vital function of the Service, is not relevant to this chapter.

Each of our local museums embraces four elements:

- 1 'permanent' displays which relate to the environment and history of the community they serve. The theme of these displays can be thought of as telling 'the story of (e.g.) Andover'. Indeed, in a number of our museums this is the formal title of the displays and in all of them it is an internal 'working' title used by the people who created them;

- 2 a room or space in each museum providing more resources and information. These include literature, indices, information about relevant material elsewhere (e.g. the County Library Service), copies of less accessible material (for example from the County Record Office), databases, videos and local photographs;
- 3 a temporary exhibition gallery, which provides space for exhibitions which extend the scope of the Service (for example, for material not represented in our collections), provides access to parts of our collections not otherwise on display, or provides facilities for community generated displays;
- 4 'permanent' displays of parts of the County Council Museums Service's collections which are not local to any one museum. This is material, of which costume, ceramics, firearms, and horology are examples, of particular quality, and of regional or national significance.

Who are we communicating with?

Hampshire has the greatest population of any English shire county (approximately 1.6 million). The towns in which our museums are located are perhaps bigger than you might think (Fareham 104,000, Basingstoke 147,000, Eastleigh 110,000). These figures are for 1993, rounded to the nearest 1,000, and are for the district area, but they may be taken as approximating to the natural catchment area of the museums concerned, and indicate the significance of the populations we are aiming to serve. We know, reliably, that between 45 and 63 per cent of our visitors to local museums live in the district, a proportion that rises to between 68 and 77 per cent for people living in Hampshire as a whole. For the museums I am considering, our visitors are overwhelmingly local. This is not the place to record a variety of other data about our visitors or measures of relative use of our museums, which we believe we have reliably ascertained, but one point is worth emphasizing because I suspect it is true for other local museum services: that is, compared with the socio-economic profile of Hampshire's population, we attract relatively more people in groups C2, D and E than AB and C1. This view is contrary to repeated surveys at other UK museums, but I believe that most surveys have, for obvious reasons, been at what you might term 'high status' museums (national museums, large independent museums and regional museums, especially those that charge for admission or require their visitor to spend significant time and effort to reach them). Very broadly speaking, and leaving aside the question of how popular our museums are, they are visited by increasing numbers of the kind of people they are planned for.

How are we communicating?

Our 'permanent' local displays (in practice nowhere older than ten years and mostly more recent) focus on the natural environment and human history of the area served by the museum, and together they may be said to describe

the County of Hampshire as a whole. The Service has some twenty years of experience providing these displays, which means many opportunities for making mistakes and, hopefully, learning from them. Because our adoption of a marketing philosophy is relatively recent, and our plan is still fairly basic, it is difficult to speak very sensibly of success or failure of the harmonization of displays and related services with the requirements of the public we seek to serve. Nevertheless, in my personal experience, interpretation of museum collections has been planned as thoughtfully and coherently as in many museums, and perhaps more so than some. This makes it possible to attempt to evaluate them against fairly well-established aims.

As our Statement of Purpose emphasizes, we see our role as educational and interpretative, however entertaining we try to be, and our displays are always some sort of compromise between telling a story and presenting collections we happen to have. We find it difficult to appreciate the more extreme points of view about the role of objects versus their interpretation through other media, and about education versus entertainment. Crudely put, we believe our visitors expect to learn something when they come to our museums, but they naturally expect us to stimulate and interest them, and I think they recognize when we try to do this, whatever the method, and are pleased to see the effort, whatever the result.

In our more recent displays we have increasingly discriminated between displays of objects, the setting of scenes and the provision of information. Thus we display objects in a simple and flexible, sometimes crowded manner. We provide for local material to be replaced, rotated and in some cases taken out for handling sessions. Displays which tightly integrate objects, text, graphics and other media on an individual basis are inherently inflexible; we want to make it possible to reorganize a case without devaluing the supporting interpretation.

We have increasingly created simple scenes to illustrate local themes, such as conditions in a workshop, a local industry, environments and so on. In some cases these incorporate museum collections but the prime intention is to set a scene. We think people like these, not at the expense of other forms of interpretation, but as part of a balanced communication of our aims.

The provision of textual information beyond brief sentences on graphics and object labels is increasingly being provided by methods which give more information to those who want it without putting off people who don't (handouts, for example). Information is provided in displays in the form of 'page devices' – relatively robustly mounted information in a form of static ring-binder.

Much more intensive sources of information are provided in resource rooms/areas. The overall philosophy is to use museum collections to stimulate interest in a balanced and attractive interpretation, and provide supporting information in specific locations. A probable future development will be to allow people to 'take the information home with them' using the opportunities of information technology.

Creating communication within the Service

A brief account of one aspect of our Service necessarily simplifies a complex situation. Among the important issues which are involved in the creation of the public face of the Service are integrating the participation of specialists within the Museums Service, and harmonizing local objectives with countywide aims. The expertise which I am particularly concerned with here is:

- the local museum management, led by an experienced professional curator with the support of two or three museum assistants (attendants);
- the education officer who has a specific brief to develop a coherent county-wide education policy to support the national curriculum;
- the marketing officer, who has an analogous brief to develop a service-wide marketing plan;
- the exhibitions officer, who co-ordinates the provision of temporary exhibitions to the museums;
- senior management, who are responsible for the provision of an integrated county museums service which fulfils all its aims.

For all the elements of the Service I have described so far, countywide policies are expressed through the services provided by local museums. Even though the staff mentioned above share a common purpose, they will have significantly different, and valid, perceptions about priorities and how to achieve them. We aim to make these differences creative, harmonize them, and communicate them through the medium of our Local Museum Service Plans. We do not approach these issues in a hierarchical way as I believe line management and staff structures, as I have argued elsewhere (Locke 1992), do not provide appropriate solutions.

The Local Museum Service Plan

The roles of the Local Museum Service Plan are:

- 1 *Negotiation and harmonization of local, countywide and specialist concerns:* production is achieved through a working party of the local curator, with the education officer, marketing officer and exhibitions officer, supported if necessary by the senior manager with overall responsibility for Hampshire history.
- 2 *Defining the resources required for the management and development of museums:* Local Museum Service Plans are the basis for both devolved budgets for museums and any countywide budgets which will support the plans.
- 3 *Statements of standard and performance:* the Local Museum Service Plan includes descriptions of current standards of service and performance indicators.
- 4 *Ownership by staff:* the statements of standard and performance encourage staff to identify with the plan in a realistic fashion.

- 5 *Communication of museum aims to community:* the statements of standard and performance are a basis for discussion with local joint management committees of county and district councils and of service level agreements should this be required.

It is likely that to many staff, especially those concerned with the operation of museums, the Local Museum Service Plans will become the only formal plans of which they need be aware in detail. Relevant elements of central plans (collections management, acquisitions, marketing, education, the budget) can all be expressed through Local Museum Service Plans. In this sense they can be seen as an outcome of devolved management and a solution to the problem of encouraging local creativity at the same time as maintaining overall standards and benefiting from strategic support. Indeed, the approach was first conceived as a method by which a countywide education policy could be expressed through a network of different local museums; as the process has developed, more uses for the plans have become apparent.

I hope that museum assistants (attendants) will benefit from Local Museum Service Plans. Because of their level of detail, timescale and immediate local relevance, museum assistants can identify with them, criticize and influence them and of course help implement them.

No museum manager with any significant experience should be naive enough to rest too much faith in any process of planning or structural approach. Because we are so reliant on the skills and knowledge of specialist staff, ordinary human interactions soon affect the achievement of any plan. The challenge is to mediate and harmonize these interactions within a framework which recognizes both long-term strategic values and standards and allows a flexible response to local circumstances. This can only be done at a certain level of detail, and may seem to be an onerous process, but when achieved, it provides a rigorous definition of the role of the museum and the work required to fulfil that role, both of which are essential for effective communication between colleagues and, most importantly of all, with the communities we serve.

Reference

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